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# INTEGRAL SERVICE

## *Part 2: What Does it Take? Integral Discipline, Karma Yoga, and Sacred Service*

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**ABSTRACT** Research suggests that a well-rounded integral health and maturation program should include 10 therapeutic lifestyle changes (TLCs). These include somatic practices, healthy nutrition, time in nature, nurturing relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, contemplative practice, psychotherapy and inner work, study, and service. The research and benefits of each of these TLCs are summarized. However, even when these TLCs are implemented, the challenge remains of how to transform all of life into integral practice and service. For this we need two further disciplines: karma yoga and sacred service, and suggestions for doing them effectively are provided. Finally, the article examines our contemporary global crises, offers an initial integral diagnosis, and points to the importance and potentials of integral responses.

**KEY WORDS** integral, karma yoga, lifestyle, service, global crisis

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Our effectiveness in the world depends on our health and maturity, and enhancing these attributes is therefore a central goal of integral service. This goal of self-actualization, and eventually self-transcendence, in order to optimize selfless service is most dramatically exemplified in the Buddhist ideal of the Bodhisattva: those individuals who dedicate themselves to awakening and the fullest actualization of their benevolent capacities in order to optimally serve the same awakening and actualization of all others.

Ideally, we want to foster well-being and growth as much as we can in as many quadrants, levels, lines, and states as we can. For this, we need an integral discipline. And this raises the important question: What kinds of practices are essential for a well-rounded integral discipline? Of course, different people will give different answers, each with its own specific emphasis. Thoughtful answers include Integral Life Practice (Wilber et al., 2008) and Integral Transformative Practice (Leonard & Murphy, 2005), the first theoretically derived and the second practically. My own approach is derived from research.

What does experimental research tell us about which lifestyle changes are most valuable? After 30 years of research and reflection on life enhancement, I suggest that a well-rounded integral health and maturation program should include the following ten kinds of practices:

1. Exercise
2. Nutrition
3. Time in nature
4. Relationships
5. Recreation
6. Relaxation and stress management
7. Contemplative and spiritual practice
8. Psychotherapy and other psychological work
9. Study
10. Service

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Many of these practices fall under the general category of therapeutic lifestyle changes (TLCs). These are increasingly being researched as invaluable elements of any health program, and for good reason since they can have major physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits.

Lifestyle factors can be powerful in determining both physical and mental health. In affluent societies, the diseases that exact the greatest mortality and morbidity—such as cardiovascular disorders, obesity, diabetes, and cancer—are now closely linked to lifestyle. Differences in just four lifestyle factors—smoking, physical activity, alcohol intake, and diet—have a major impact on mortality, amounting to a lifespan impact of up to 14 years: “Even small differences in lifestyle can make a major difference in health status” (Khaw et al., 2008, p. 376).

Therapeutic lifestyle changes can be potent. They have the capacity to reverse coronary arteriosclerosis, ameliorate prostate cancer, and be as effective as psychotherapy or medication for treating depressive disorders (Frattaroli et al., 2008; Sidhu et al., 2009). Consequently, there is growing awareness of the need to focus on lifestyle changes for primary prevention, secondary intervention, and to empower self-management of physical and mental health. In fact, the need for attention to lifestyle is growing. Unhealthy behaviors such as overeating and lack of exercise are increasing to such an extent that the World Health Organization (2008) warned that “an escalating global epidemic of overweight and obesity—‘globesity’—is taking over many parts of the world,” exacting enormous medical, psychological, social, and economic costs.

For individuals, a well-rounded TLC program can benefit many domains of life and some can foster maturation. For societies, TLCs may offer significant economic and community advantages. Economic benefits accrue from reducing the costs of lifestyle-related disorders such as obesity, which alone costs the United States over \$100 billion each year (WHO, 2008). Community benefits can occur directly through enhanced personal relationships, service, social networks and social capital (Post & Niemark, 2007; Post, 2007).

Recent research has demonstrated that healthy behaviors and happiness can spread extensively through social networks, even through three degrees of separation to, for example, the friends of one’s friends’ friends (Fowler & Christakis, 2008, 2010). Adopting TLCs can inspire similar healthy behaviors and greater well-being for families, friends, and co-workers, thereby having far-reaching multiplier effects (Christakis, 2009; Christakis & Fowler, 2009). These effects offer novel evidence for the widespread public health benefits of health interventions in general and of integral lifestyles in particular.

I have previously written extensive reviews of TLCs and of spiritual practices. Therefore, here I will offer summaries and key principles and will refer readers to the original article and book for full-discussions (Walsh, 1999, 2011). A film documentary on lifestyle changes is also in preparation (see [www.8waystowellbeing.com](http://www.8waystowellbeing.com)).

## 1. Exercise

A well-rounded exercise program includes five components:

1. Cardiopulmonary or endurance training
2. Strength training
3. Flexibility/stretching
4. Balance
5. Somatic awareness

To give a sense of the power of exercise, consider the following. A good cardiopulmonary program can, among other things, treat depression about as effectively as either pharmacotherapy or psychotherapy, can enhance cognitive function, reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s disease by up to 45%, and increase brain size and hippocampal neurogenesis (Walsh, 2011).

## 2. Nutrition

It is easy to spend years, as I did, studying the literature on nutrition and feel chronically overwhelmed. Fortunately, the most important findings can be summarized in three key principles. Research studies agree that a physically and mentally healthy diet should:

1. Consist predominately of multicolored fruits and vegetables (a *rainbow diet*)
2. Include fish (a *pescatarian diet*). Fish oil supplements may also be valuable, but their benefits are not as well established
3. Minimize excess calories

It's hard to overemphasize the physical and mental health significance of diet. Suffice to say that diet plays a large role in determining the health of whole nations and that owing to epigenetic factors, "the effects of diet on mental health can be transmitted across generations" (Gomez-Pinilla, 2008, p. 575). Interestingly, contemporary research overlaps with venerable yogic dietary recommendations such as vegetarianism and moderation. "As one's food, so is one's mind" is the yogic principle, and Gandhi claimed that "diet is a powerful factor, not to be neglected" (Feuerstein, 1996, pp. 63, 66).

## 3. Time in Nature

Developed nations are currently conducting an unprecedented, uncontrolled, massive global experiment in which more and more citizens are spending their lives in artificial environments—walled inside, under artificial illumination, and divorced from nature. We are only beginning to understand the effects of this way of being, but the costs can range from physical to psychological, spiritual, existential and interpersonal, and can produce what is popularly called "nature-deficit disorder" (Louv, 2005).

For thousands of years, wise people have recommended nature as a source of healing, renewal, spiritual nourishment, and wisdom. Consequently, shamans, yogis, and contemplatives from diverse traditions often seek time in nature (Walsh, 2007). Romantic and existential philosophers echoed similar claims, and the Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1807/1998) famously lamented:

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away... (p. 307)

Clearly, nature seekers from shamans to romantics were onto something because a recent research review concluded:

Imagine a therapy that had no known side effects, was readily available, and could improve your cognitive functioning at zero cost. Such a therapy has been known to philosophers, writers, and laypeople alike: interacting with nature. Many have suspected that nature can promote improved cognitive functioning and overall well-being, and these effects have recently been documented. (Berman et al., 2008, p. 1207)

Yet in today's nature-free settings, noise is often annoying, lighting is often artificial and of low intensity (often less than 10% of sunny days), and composed of unnatural spectra and rhythms. As the burgeoning field of environmental psychology demonstrates, the psychological costs of such settings can be wide-ranging. These costs include disruptions of mood, sleep, and diurnal rhythms. Cognitive costs include short-term

impairment of attention and cognition as well as long-term reduced academic performance in the young and greater cognitive decline in the elderly (Anthes, 2009; Higgins et al., 2005; Kuller et al., 2006). Fortunately, research demonstrates that natural settings can enhance cognitive, attentional, emotional, spiritual, and subjective well-being (Pryor et al., 2006). Clearly, spending time in nature, and working to preserve it, deserves to be part of any healthy lifestyle, especially an integral one (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009).

## 4. Relationships

The idea that good relationships are central to physical, mental, and spiritual well-being is an ancient theme, now supported by considerable research. Rich relationships reduce health risks ranging from the common cold to stroke, mortality, and multiple psychopathologies. On the positive side, good relationships are associated with enhanced happiness, quality of life, resilience, and cognitive capacity (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Jetten et al., 2009). Analyses of different domains of life indicate that quality of life is “dominated by the domain of intimacy” and that people with overt psychopathology have a lower quality of life “most particularly in the domain of intimacy” (Cummins, 2005, p. 559).

These clinical observations can now be grounded in the emerging field of social neuroscience, which suggests that we are interdependent creatures, hardwired for empathy and relationships through, for example, the mirror neuron system (Cattaneo & Rizzolatti, 2009). So powerful is interpersonal rapport that couples can mold one another both psychologically and physically. They may even come to look more alike, as resonant emotions sculpt their facial muscles into similar patterns—a process known as the *Michelangelo phenomenon* (Rusbult et al., 2009).

The need may be greater than ever, because social isolation may be increasing and exacting significant individual and social costs. For example, considerable evidence suggests that, compared with previous decades, Americans today are spending less time with family and friends, have fewer intimate friends and confidants, and are less socially involved in civic groups and communities (McPherson et al., 2006; Putnam, 1995, 2000). This is important for many reasons, including that “the health risk of social isolation is comparable to the risks of smoking, high blood pressure and obesity. . . . [while] participation in group life can be like an inoculation against threats to mental and physical health” (Jetten et al., 2009, pp. 29, 33).

Beyond the individual physical and mental health costs of greater social isolation are public health costs. In “perhaps the most discussed social science article of the twentieth century” (Montanye, 2001), and in a subsequent widely read book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, the political scientist Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) focused on the importance of social capital. *Social capital* is the sum benefit of the community connections and networks that link people and foster, for example, beneficial social engagement, support, trust, and reciprocity (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Social capital seems positively and partly causally related to a wide range of social health measures as well as increased physical and mental health in individuals. Yet considerable evidence suggests that social capital in the United States and other societies has declined significantly in recent decades (Putnam, 1995, 2000).

Contemplative and wisdom traditions have long emphasized the importance of relationships and especially the value of relationships with a teacher and group of fellow practitioners. For example, ancient philosophy (love of wisdom) “could be carried out only by means of a community of life and dialogue between masters and disciples, within the framework of a school” (Hadot, 2002, p. 56). Likewise, Buddhism’s “three jewels” consist of the Buddha (teacher), the *dharma* (teaching), and the *sangha* (community). Both the idea of “transmission” from teacher to student and of the supportive value of fellow practitioners acknowledge the power of relationships to shape values and behavior (Walsh, 2014). In short, consciousness is catchy, and the collective quadrants matter.

Given the importance of relationships for physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being, then tending to relationships and improving relationship skills are obviously crucial elements of an integral life-

style and discipline. For enhancing relationship skills, two things can be especially valuable. One is a mutual commitment between friends to use their relationships for mutual learning, growth, and awakening. The second is participation in small process groups aimed at exploring the relationships and psychological issues that emerge within them. Both are excellent ways to make best use of the “miracle called ‘we’” (Wilber, 2006).

## 5. Recreation

Considerable research suggests that enjoyable recreational activities, and the positive emotions that ensue, can produce multiple psychological and physical benefits (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007). Enjoyable activities are crucial for a healthy lifestyle and *recreation* (re-creation) summarizes some of the many benefits. Recreation can restore and heal and also produce positive emotions, which are themselves enormously important. As one researcher concluded:

Through experiences of positive emotions people *transform* themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy individuals.... The bottom line message is that we should work to cultivate positive emotions in ourselves and in those around us not just as end states in themselves, but also as a means of achieving psychological growth and improved psychological and physical health over time. (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 120)

## 6. Relaxation and Stress Management

Chronic stress exacts a toll that ranges from psychological and spiritual through physiological and biochemical, right down to the level of genomic expression. Unfortunately, although stress is universal, few people are trained to manage it, and humans now face an array of novel stressors for which there are no historical precedents.

Fortunately, many effective strategies for stress management are now available, ranging from lifestyle changes to psychotherapy to self-management skills. Beneficial TLCs include most of those discussed in this article, especially nature, relationships, recreation, and exercise. These can be complemented with specific self-management skills such as mindful movement practices (e.g., tai chi and qi gong), which have been found effective in treating disorders such as anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2009). Other useful self-management strategies include contemplative and yogic practices, muscle relaxation skills, as well as self-hypnosis and guided imagery. Research reviews suggest that yoga may be helpful (daSilva & Ravindran, 2009), while an enormous literature demonstrates the stress-alleviating effects of meditation, which integral practitioners will want to practice for multiple reasons (Sedlmeier et al., 2012; Walsh, 2013).

Of course, relaxation can go much further than stress management. Beyond both relaxation and stress management is the possibility of profound peace, which multiple contemplative and philosophical traditions have long regarded as one of the greatest virtues. For example, “all Hellenistic schools” of philosophy define wisdom “first and foremost, as a state of perfect peace of mind” (Hadot, 2002, p. 103). For Vedanta, “you cannot see the true unless you are at peace” (Nisargadatta, 1973, p. 249), and Shankara promises that “when the heart is peaceful, the vision of the Atman comes” (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1978, p. 88). Profound peace seems to be essential for and part of transpersonal well-being and maturity.

## 7. Contemplative and Spiritual Practice

For an overview of the essential elements of a full and effective spiritual practice, see *Essential Spirituality: The Seven Central Practices* (Walsh, 1999) or the article “The Art of Transcendence” (Walsh & Vaughan,



1993). For research reviews of the many effects and benefits of meditation, see Sedlmeier and colleagues (2012) and Walsh (2013). Suffice it to say that there is now considerable evidence for a wider array of benefits—physical, somatic, spiritual, psychological, perceptual, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal—from meditation than for any other therapy. Meditation even seems to enhance development on several maturation lines and to increase brain size in certain areas (Walsh, 2013).

## 8. Psychotherapy and Other Psychological Work

Individual inner exploration with meditation and contemplative practices can be invaluable. However, they do not necessarily reveal psychodynamic defenses, and we all have unconscious blind spots and shadow elements that only others can see. This is an ancient idea, most famously enunciated by Jesus with his words, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3, English Standard Version).

For unveiling, working with, and releasing these “logs,” psychotherapy is invaluable. Integral practitioners will probably want to work with therapists who are integrally informed. However, it is important to know that the most important determinants of therapeutic effectiveness are the client’s and therapist’s personal qualities and the quality of the relationship they establish (Yalom, 2002).

## 9. Study

As integral practitioners we are called to four kinds of study. The first is the study of Integral Theory and the second is study to develop expertise in our chosen field or profession. Only by this dual study and mastery can we be effective in bringing an integral perspective to bear on our work and service in the world.

Beyond these is the study of sacred texts in two distinct ways. The first is *lectio divina*. This is a slow, reflective reading that seeks transformation rather than information, wisdom rather than knowledge. Over time this may deepen into *meditatio* (reflection), *oratio* (an emotional, heartfelt response), and *contemplatio* (contemplative opening) (Keating, 2003). The second way is to memorize key phrases or sentences that leap to mind and guide our responses whenever we face important choices or challenges (Hadot, 2002).

## 10. Service

Service and contribution to other are paradoxical virtues, because although we give to others we receive ourselves. The world’s spiritual traditions are clear that, when viewed correctly, service is not a sacrifice. Rather it is a gift to both giver and receiver, since giving fosters positive mental qualities such as happiness, mental health, and spiritual maturity (Walsh, 1999).

This ancient idea now has considerable research support. Multiple studies suggest that people who volunteer more are psychologically happier and healthier, physically healthier, and may even live longer (Post, 2007). Altruists tend to experience a “helper’s high,” so to speak. For example, even required community service for adolescents produces long-term beneficial psychological changes. Likewise, even mandated monetary donations can make college students happier than if they spent the money on themselves (Dunn et al., 2009). In addition, the benefits of altruism can extend beyond both giver and receiver because altruism has a positive social contagion or multiplier effect. People who benefit from altruistic acts are more likely to be altruistic themselves. The result is a cooperative behavior cascade through social networks to elicit further cooperation from others (Fowler & Christakis, 2010).

This is one more example of the recent findings that our behaviors and moods ricochet through extended social networks to influence people we may never even meet. When we adopt healthy behaviors, take up a meditation practice, or help others, we are therefore likely to elicit similar behavior changes among our

friends, family and coworkers, and they in turn are likely to inspire others. Thus our integral practice and integral service may benefit an extended network of people far wider than we recognize. They benefit and so do we. As the Dalai Lama put it, “If you’re going to be selfish, be wisely selfish—which means to love and serve others, since love and service to others bring rewards to oneself that otherwise would be unachievable” (Hopkins, 2001, p. 150). Properly perceived, service is not a sacrifice but is enlightened self-interest.

The circle is complete. An integral practice requires integral service, and integral service requires an integral practice.

### ***Karma Yoga and Sacred Service***

One further challenge remains. That challenge is to transform all of life into integral practice and integral service, extending from sporadic moments into a continuous discipline that envelops all of life. For this we need karma yoga and what we can call sacred service or awakening service.

Karma yoga is one of Hinduism’s classic yoga disciplines: the one which aims to use all the activities of daily life as the elements of one’s spiritual practice. Its goal is to transform all life into spiritual practice, or as the Indian philosopher-sage Aurobindo (1922) put it, “turning of this whole act of living into an uninterrupted yoga” (p. 283). Karma yoga therefore allows an unbroken continuity of practice in daily life, and this continuity is widely regarded as one of the great goals and virtues of spiritual life. For example, the Koran urges us to “Be constant in prayer” (Koran 2:83; Cleary, 1993, p. 9), while Ramakrishna claimed that “what is necessary is to pray without ceasing” (Hixon, 1992, p. 116). Likewise, the Christian St. Isaac the Syrian regarded constant prayer as “the summit of all virtues” (Harvey, 1998, p. 63).

### ***Three Classic Elements of Karma Yoga***

Classic texts on karma yoga, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, emphasize three main elements of the practice:

- At the beginning of any activity, offer or dedicate the activity to Brahman (God).
- Do your *dharma* (work) as impeccably as possible.
- Simultaneously release attachment to “the fruits of your action” (i.e., to the outcome).

Classic texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* are profound and inspiring. However, they are also somewhat vague regarding the specifics of karma yoga, and how exactly one approaches daily life so as to use all activities as elements of one’s contemplative practice. After years of exploration and experimentation, I have found it helpful to use the following ten steps.

### ***Ten Key Steps of Karma Yoga***

1. *Stop* before beginning any major activity. Taking a moment to stop and breathe allows one to become present and to recall one’s purpose.
2. *Offer* the activity to God or to a Higher Power or Source.
3. *Choose an intention*. The intention we set determines the meaning the activity has for us and the results it gives us. We can do the same activity, such as our job, primarily for our own benefit, or for the welfare and awakening of all those with whom we interact. While the activity may be the same, the psychological and spiritual impact on us—and probably those around us—will be very different.

This makes sense in terms of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. As a general principle, a higher order motive—such as self-actualization, self-transcendence,



or selfless service—brings specific benefits plus the benefits of lower order goals as well. For example, if you only aim for lower-order motives such as survival and physical comfort, that is probably all you will receive. However, if you also aim for self-actualization, then you will automatically include the satisfaction of appropriate lower-order needs as well. This is not only good psychology, but also good theology. As Jesus said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteous, and all these things shall be added onto you” (Matthew 6:33, King James Version).

4. *Attempt to do the activity impeccably.* Here the goal is to hold to your highest intention and to express it as impeccably as you can.
5. *Be mindful.* Bring as much awareness to the activity as you can, observing, for example, your actions, the environment, your mental state and motivation.
6. *Explore and work with any reactions that arise.* These might range from blocks and resistance to pride and joy. It is especially helpful to be aware of any reactivity to how your activity is turning out. Pay particular attention to any emotions that indicate attachment to obtaining a specific outcome. These emotions can span a spectrum from delight and pride if things are working out as you hoped, to anxiety, anger, disappointment, and hopelessness if they are not. All these emotions can be welcomed as feedback signals pointing to an attachment that would be better released.
7. *Release attachment to the outcome.* Whenever you notice reactivity indicating attachment, that’s a feedback signal to attempt to let it go.
8. *At the end of the activity, stop once again.*
9. *Reflect and learn.* Take time to reflect on the activity and your experience and see what you can learn. For example, what can you learn about doing this activity effectively, about yourself, your mind, and your attachments?
10. *Offer the benefit to all others for their welfare and awakening.* It seems paradoxical to labor to do one’s work impeccably and accrue spiritual benefits, and then attempt to give them away. But this final phase of the practice is based on a profound understanding of the way the mind works. What is crucial to recognize is that what we intend for others, we tend to experience ourselves. For example, if we receive benefits such as a sense of satisfaction and well-being from karma yoga, and intend to offer these benefits to others, then these same qualities are further strengthened in our own minds. This is a beautiful example of the principle that within the mind, to give is to receive.

### ***Sacred Service***

Karma yoga does not explicitly aim at the service of others. However, it can easily be transformed into a practice of spiritual service by two simple steps included in the above list.

- Step 3: Choose as your intention to use your activities not only for your own awakening, but also as a way to serve and awaken others.
- Step 10: At the completion of any activity offer the benefits for the welfare and awakening of all.

When an action is done as both karma yoga and as service it becomes what we can call sacred service, or *awakening service* because it combines spiritual practice and service, and aims at awakening and actualizing both oneself and others.

## The Context and Crises of Our Times

We live and work and serve in an all-encompassing context that is unique to our time. This unique context has three central elements:

- An encompassing integral vision
- An emerging global community
- A global crisis that threatens both our planet and our species

We are all aware of the major elements of this crisis: elements such as population explosion, ecological degradation, species extinction, and weapons of mass destruction. What is crucial to recognize is that for the first time in history, the major threats to human survival and well-being are all human caused. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, humankind now possesses enormous power but little wisdom, and it is no exaggeration to say that humankind is now in a race between consciousness and catastrophe (Walsh, 2014).

So great is our power that the state of the world now reflects the state of our minds and the problems around us now reflect the problems within us and between us. Therefore, what we call our global problems are actually global symptoms. In terms of the four quadrants, they are symptoms of our:

- Psychological immaturities and pathologies
- Distorted cultural beliefs, myths, and values
- Dysfunctional social institutions
- Neural dysfunctions. For example, we seem to be evolutionarily hardwired for “temporal discounting”: the tendency to overvalue immediate gratification and under-value or discount future rewards, even if the future rewards are actually far greater (Freedman, 2013). We see this process at work in individual and collective pathologies ranging from obesity to ecological destruction to climate denial.

Therefore, if we are going to preserve our planet and our species, we certainly need to feed the hungry, stop pollution, and reduce weapons of war. But if we only do this, we are only treating symptoms. We also need to address their underlying developmental, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural, and neural causes. In short, we need integral analyses of our crises, we need to respond with integral approaches, we need to do them as integral service, and we need to prepare ourselves with integral practices.

For this we need to do both inner and outer work. We need periods when we withdraw within ourselves to do inner work and to tap the wellsprings of insight and creativity that lie within us. And of course we need periods of going out into the world to act in service. This is what Arnold Toynbee called “the cycle of withdrawal and return,” and for this there are many metaphors.

In the West, the classic metaphor is Plato's cave. Here the person escapes from the cave into the light and sees the Good, but then feels impelled to return to the collective darkness of the cave in order to help, heal, and teach others. In Christianity, this final stage is called the “fruitfulness of the soul.” The soul that experiences the divine marriage then separates once again in order to help those who have not yet tasted this marriage. Zen portrays this sequence graphically and beautifully in the Ten Ox Herding Pictures, and Joseph Campbell described this process as the hero's return.

In summary, we go into ourselves to go more effectively out into the world, and we go out into the world in order to go deeper into ourselves. And we keep repeating this cycle until we realize that we and the world are one.

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